

Native bees take up honeybee slack

AUBURN, Ala. (AP) — Native American bees have stepped in to do the pollination work of the nation's dwindling supply of honeybees.

And they appear to be saving crops in some areas, say Auburn University researchers and bee experts in Arizona and Maine.

Honeybees took a beating last spring from mites, pesticides and bad weather, accelerating a five-year decline in their population. Scientists feared that would mean a shortage this year of pumpkins, apples, cranberries, almonds and other fruits and nuts.

But bumblebees and other native varieties are picking up the slack.

The honeybee originally came from Europe. All the wild honeybees in U.S. woods are descendants of those European bees, and up to 90 percent of them in some regions were wiped out by an epidemic of mites.

Pollination between a male and female flower is necessary to make a fruit. Bees unwittingly do this as they crawl into flower after flower in search of pollen.

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In August, when Cane and Auburn graduate students Tai Roulston and Blair Sampson walked the rows of an Alabama pumpkin patch, they found native bumblebees foraging for nectar and pollen in the flowers of the

pumpkins.

The bumblebees averaged nine bees per hundred flowers and accounted for half the bee visitors, Cane said. There also were honey bees, sweat bees, leaf-cutting bees and squash bees.

Field sampling in Arizona and Maine in late summer and fall found a similar result. Where native bees persist in sufficient numbers in the natural vegetation next to crop lands, they can do enough pollination to set fruit, even when honeybees are absent.

It's possible for farmers and gardeners to help — or hurt — the native bees that Stephen Buchmann, a researcher at the Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum, calls the "forgotten pollinators."

Bees are active in the mornings, so delaying the spraying of any pesticide until evening will help protect them.

Bee experts estimate that 75 percent to 90 percent of the feral honeybees in the United States have disappeared from hollow tree trunks and rock crevices in forests and deserts in recent years.